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RE: The 1920 Revolution

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**The 1920 Revolution
al-Thawrat al-`Iraqiyat al-Kubra**

The 1920 Revolution in Iraq refers to the great popular revolt against the British forces in Iraq. The revolution started in Baghdad in the summer of 1920 with mass demonstrations of both Sunni and Shiites, including protests by embittered officers from the old Ottoman Empire army, against the policies of Sir Arnold Wilson, the British Civil Commissioner in Baghdad 1918 – 1920. Sir Arnold who was known for his role as the colonial administrator of Mesopotamia during and after the First World War. His reputed high-handedness led to the Iraqi Revolt of 1920.

The revolution gained momentum when it spread to the largely Shiite regions of the Middle and Lower Euphrates. Sheikh Mahdi al-Khalisi was a prominent Shia leader of the revolt. Although the revolt was largely over by the end of 1920, it continued sporadically until 1922. During the revolt British forces used poison gas and air attacks on Iraqi villagers.

Sheikh Mahdi al-Khalisi (died 1925), was a prominent Shiite cleric in Iraq. He was deported by the British because he had told his followers not to collaborate with British plans for the country, which contributing factor to the Iraqi revolt. Initially, they took him to India; but because his presence there aroused sympathy among Indian Muslims, he was then moved to `Adan-Yemen. Eventually he went into exile in Iran, dying in the north-eastern Iranian city of Mashhad.

When the news of the British acceptance of the Iraqi Mandate reached Iraq in late May, 1920, a group of Iraqi delegates met with Wilson and demanded independence. Wilson dismissed them as a "handful of ungrateful politicians." Nationalist political activity was stepped up, and the grand mujtahid of Karbala, Imam al-Shirazi, and his son, Mirza Muhammad Ridha, began to organize independence efforts in earnest. Arab flags were made and distributed, and pamphlets were handed out urging the tribes to prepare for revolt. Muhammad Ridha acted as liaison among insurgents in Najaf and in Karbala, and among the tribal confederations. Shirazi then issued a fatwa (religious ruling), pointing out that it was against Islamic law for Muslims to countenance being ruled by non-Muslims, and he called for a Jihad against the British. By July 1920, Mosul was in rebellion against British rule, and the insurrections moved south down the Euphrates River valley. The southern tribes, who cherished their long-held political autonomy, needed little inducement to join in the fray. They did not cooperate in an organized effort against the British, however, which limited the effect of the revolt. The country was in a state of anarchy for three months; the British restored order only with great difficulty and with the assistance of Royal Air Force bombers. British forces were obliged to send for reinforcements from India and from Iran.

The Great Iraqi Revolution (as the 1920 Rebellion is called), was a watershed event in contemporary Iraqi history. For the first time, Sunnis and Shiites, tribes and cities, were brought together in a common effort. In the opinion of Hanna Batatu, author of a seminal work on Iraq, the building of a nation-state in Iraq depended upon two major factors: the integration of Shiites and Sunnis into the new body politic and the successful resolution of the age-old conflicts between the tribes and the riverine cities and among the tribes themselves over the food-producing flatlands of the Tigris and the Euphrates. The 1920 Rebellion brought these groups together, if only briefly; this constituted an important first step in the long and arduous process of forging a nation-state out of Iraq's conflict-ridden social structure.

The 1920 Rebellion had been very costly to the British in both manpower and money. Whitehall was under domestic pressure to devise a formula that would provide the maximum control over Iraq at the least cost to the British taxpayer. The British replaced the military regime with a provisional Arab government, assisted by British advisers and answerable to the supreme authority of the High Commissioner for Iraq, Cox. The new administration provided a channel of communication between the British and the restive population, and it gave Iraqi leaders an opportunity to prepare for eventual self-government. The provisional government was aided by the large number of trained Iraqi administrators who returned home when the French ejected Faisal from Syria. Like earlier Iraqi governments, however, the provisional government was composed chiefly of Sunni Arabs; once again the Shiites were underrepresented.

Some details about the Revolution

- **June 30 1920 (13 Shawwal 1339):** The spark that ignited the revolution was when ten men attacked the British police in al-Rumaythah (38RNV 1959 4 87929) and released Sheikh Sha`lan from the prison and killed four of the British Forces.
- **July 1st 1920:** The Iraqi rebels destroyed the lines of the railroads around al-Rumaythah to prevent the the arrival of British reinforcements.
- **July 4th:** The rebels attacked a supplies train between Baghdad and Basrah. The British Forces lost over 47 people that day.
- **Battle of `Ardhiyat:** In that battle, some tribes joined together and launched an attack against British Forces near al-Samawah and the attack on a ship called Fire Fly.
- **Al-Razinhiyah (Rustumiyah):** The location was between Hillah and Kafal. During this battle the rebels were able to gain massive amounts of military supplies and weapons.
- Mosul tribes and some tribes in Karbala expressed their interest in being ruled by the British. Kurds and Yazidis agreed that they did not want Iraq to be ruled by Arabs, they accepted the British state to rule Iraq.
- **The Fatwa of al-Shirazi:** The Grand Imam of Karbala issues a statement that any one accepts a non-Muslim government will be considered an infidel. Karbala became the capital of the Iraqi Revolution and witnessed the establishment of the first Iraqi government in Karbala in Oct 6 1920. This Fatwa came after more than one incident that al-Shirazi ordered his followers not to work in any official job that is under the

British administration which caused thousands of resignations among Iraqis working in official jobs. he also threatened more than one time that he will flee the country to Iran and declare Jihad from there.

The British Forces conducted a referendum on the desire of the Iraqis to choose to live in an Arab state or a state led by Britain. The referendum's results were supportive of the Arab state idea, but the British rejected it. It was then when the theological authorities in Karbala started conducted communications with the US President Wilson and the American Embassy in Tehran.

These communications with the Americans can be summarized by the following:

- Indicated the acceptance of the four principles that were presented in the US by President Wilson which he specified in them that each nation has the right to be independent in their own state.
- Accepting the American intermediary role under the reasoning that is permissible to "ally with infidels to gain benefits for the Islamic nation".
- The religious authority is the representative of the Iraqi people who had chosen them to defend the nation.
- Criticizing the British for not accepting the results of the referendum that they conducted themselves.
- Wise diplomacy by forcing the decision to be made by the people of Iraq through provincial councils.

The Revolution was announced publicly on June 30, 1920. It started after Muhammad al-Shirazi issued a fatwa ordering Jihad against the British. The revolution lasted for 5 months and its greatest loss was the death of al-Shirazi who was succeeded by Fathallah al-Asfahani AKA Sheikh al-Shari`ah. Britain did not forgive the Iraqis for what they did; they exiled all the religious authorities and prevented them from returning.